12-1993

Archival Chronicle: Vol 12 No 3

Bowling Green State University. Center for Archival Collections

Archival Chronicle

December 1993: *Volume 12, Number 3*

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Gas and Oil Boom Develops Region

Shooting an oil well with a nitroglycerine charge forced oil to stream upward before pumping could begin. This photograph of a Wood County well is one of many from the Max Shaffer Collection (MS 336) depicting oil and gas operations in northwest Ohio prior to 1920.

The year was 1836. Hancock County settler Richard Wade was digging a well to provide water for his family and livestock. At a depth of ten feet, he "found sufficient" and stopped for dinner. When he returned, the well smelled so foul that he feared he would have to abandon it. According to some local stories, he lit a torch to inspect the walls and peered in. The explosion from the natural gas that had seeped into the well convinced him to draw his water from another source. Wade rigged a primitive collection system in the well and amused his neighbors by igniting it from time to time. After a few years, Wade filled in the well for safety's sake. (William Depue Humphrey, *A Brief History of Gas and Oil in Findlay*, Ohio, s.n., 1940, pp. 14-15). Although native peoples had used petroleum for medicinal purposes, few settlers in northwest Ohio realized that the oil and natural gas that polluted their wells could be anything more than a nuisance. Several explosive accidents with "amusements" similar to Wade's made local residents cautious in their regard for this natural curiosity.

Following the Civil War, industrialists began looking for new sources of energy cleaner and cheaper than coal. The oil found first in Pennsylvania appeared to have domestic as well as commercial uses. Companies formed throughout neighboring Ohio to prospect for this new resource. Drilling methods were primitive and little was known about the clues surface geology could provide to the wealth beneath.

Natural gas was struck in paying quantities in northwest Ohio in 1884. The fields lay in Allen, Wood, Hancock, and Sandusky counties, as well as parts of Lucas, Mercer, Seneca, Van Wert, and Wyandot counties. Local use was the first priority, with the gas piped directly from the wells to homes and businesses. The Center for Archival Collections holds manuscripts and printed materials documenting the activity, from drilling and salvage work to consumer products. Some of these include: Gibsonburg Cooperatieve Oil Company (MS 13), Oil Well Salvage Company (MMS 15), Whitehouse Natural Gas Company (MMS 1271), and Steward, Pope, and Sullivan Company (MMS 992).

Most spectacular of all was the Karg well in Hancock County. First erupting January 20, 1886, its initial flow of gas was 12,000,000 cubic feet per day at a pressure so great it could not be brought under control for four months. For safety reasons, it was burned off. The roar of the well could be heard for five miles.

Real estate values skyrocketed and local populations swelled as communities offered free gas and plant sites to new businesses. Sixty acres of farmland north of Bowling Green, previously valued at $3,500, was purchased for $24,000 at the height of the boom. Findlay's population in 1884 was 4,633. By the end of 1887, it had grown to an estimated 14,000.

Glassworks rapidly moved into the region and became important local industries. Information documenting the glass industry can be found in the Tiffin Glass Company Collection (**MS 401**) as well as in books and pamphlets at the CAC. Labor unions formed to advocate the interests of these workers. The CAC holds records of the Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers International Union locals of Lima and Toledo (**MS 79** and **MS 291**respectively), as well as others. Many residents recorded their observations in their diaries and letters (examples include the Charles Faust Diary (MMS 415), the Carpenter Family Papers (**MS 7**), and the Christian Risser Correspondence (**MS 308**). For information on how local government records document the gas and oil boom, see the accompanying article.

Meanwhile, there were problems. The supply of gas outstripped the current demand, and the price dropped to $.15 per barrel. The Ohio product had a high sulphur content which could not be refined by existing methods, limiting its desirability for domestic use. However, promoters maintained this was a safety feature, as homeowners could detect leaks by tracing the smell of rotten eggs. Geologists did not yet understand the process by which the gas and oil were formed, believing them to be part of a natural cycle--the more that was withdrawn, the more the earth would create; thus they believed the resources were literally inexhaustible. No one practiced conservation. Lights and stoves were left burning twenty-four hours a day, and overheated rooms were cooled by opening windows. The loss through the Karg well alone during its four-month uncontrolled flow was estimated at 1.5 billion cubic feet (Humphrey, p. 52). Gradually, the supply of gas began to decrease.

As the gas decreased, the oil underneath began to come in, which eased the economic impact on communities. Shortly after 1900, a slump was noticeable. The discovery of oilfields in the West and Southwest drew attention away from Ohio. The Ohio Oil Company (later called Marathon) maintained its headquarters in Findlay, even as its markets expanded and its exploration widened to cover the world. Oil pumps can still be seen working throughout northwest Ohio, and as the world's supply of this natural resource diminishes, new ways may be found to make abandoned wells produce profitably again.

--Lee N. McLaird

Recording the Boom

Few local government records exist that document the oil and gas boom in northwest Ohio. The county auditor's *Oil and Gas Returns* provide detailed data about production on leased land. Arranged chronologically, the show the name and address of the lessor and lessee, location and legal description of land, number of acres leased, number of wells, monthly production rates measured for oil in barrels and for gas in cubic feet, royalty rates, and average market value. *Oil Well Lists* include the name and address of owner, location and legal description of land, number of wells, type of power, production, and total revenue. The county recorder's office maintains a *Record of Leases*. Arranged chronologically, the lease records contain lease transcripts, subleases, assignments of leases, and memorandum of leases. They include the name and address of lessor and lessee, location and legal description of land, rent, land use information, and special conditions or terms such as determination of utility, tax, insurance, maintenance and repair, and property alteration payments, as well as renewing and subleasing options.

--Stephen M. Charter

A Gas Station on Every Corner

Although the derricks of the gas boom have largely disappeared form northwest Ohio, the structural legacy of that industry remains in the form of the ubiquitous gas station. A functional building type, the gas station is specifically designed to serve automotive needs. Its evolution from a metal-clad shed to a super-service station reflects the growth of the petroleum industry, as well as the changing tastes of the American motoring public.

The invention of the gasoline-powered motor vehicle irrevocably changed the American landscape. At first, the gasoline that fueled those vehicles was distributed through the local livery stable, blacksmith shop, or hardware store. The fuel was brought by horse-drawn wagons from bulk oil stations on the outskirts of town and sold in cans and tin containers.

Soon, repair garages (sometimes called "auto liveries") sprang up. At first, these were primitive brick buildings or steel sheds. But improvements in fuel distribution and a public outcry over the unsafe and unsightly features of these ramshackle structures resulted in some lasting changes in filling station design and construction.

In 1905, S. F. Bowser developed the first outdoor gas pump, dispensing gasoline directly into the car's fuel tank. Shortly later, J. A. Tokheim's curbside pumps with underground storage freed the retailer from the bulk station, allowing greater flexibility in station design and siting. As a twentieth century invention, the gas station had no stylistic precedent, and so the appearance of these buildings ranged from the fantastic to the comfortably familiar before arriving at the current corporate-generated standard.

In the early part of the century, roads were still largely unimproved, and retailers had difficulty in choosing the best sites. Prefabricated stations proved to be a temporary solution. The Union Metal Manufacturing Company of Canton, Ohio and the Edward Manufacturing Company of Cincinnati were early makers of movable stations.

Eventually, however, these businesses were permanently sited, ideally on a corner lot with plenty of exposure to passing traffic. To capture that business, operators diversified their products, services, and amenities. In the 1920's, pits and lifts were incorporated within a station "lubritorium" so that repairs could be made on site. A two-column canopy protected motorists from the elements as they stopped to refuel. Restrooms were added, windshields were wiped, road maps handed out, and snack counters became a regular feature of these roadside stops. By the mid-twenties, the filling station was not unlike today's convenience store.

--Maura Johnson